

Janelle Paquette

An amusement park at the end of the world.

Chicken Scratch

Butt sweat.

The kind that leaks onto the back of my thighs and suction cups me to the seat beneath. Every time I move I hear a *smack smack* as my limbs pop away from the sticky plastic.

I run my hands over my thighs and feel the unshaven brittle ends of hair I wax or shave every chance I get. I'm self-conscious about it, even from behind the glass window I wonder if Blondie in front of me sees it. The splintering branches that grow through my pores.

"Donny? Donny, honey what is it we're gettin'?" she says to her husband, who herds their kids towards the spinning gate of the park.

"The ultra, uh—"

"The Ultra Space Bungee Package?" I pipe in, making sure to emphasize each individual word as my manager instructed.

"For the little one." The woman gestures towards her youngest, a little girl clutching a mass-produced Space Aardvark, the official mascot of Beyond Earth theme park.

Space Aardvark. *Connard*.

"Can she come in it with *meh*?" she continues. She slides her hot pink sunglasses down the bridge of her swollen nose.

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“The spacesuit? Ma’am, it’s a spacesuit so only one person can be in it at a time. There are multiple kid sizes available—”

“And food? You gots any food for the kids?”

She must be American.

“There’s a hot dog stand once you’re inside the park, near the falls. Will that be everything ma’am?”

She searches through her army-sized bag and whips out her credit card, before asking, “How much’ll that be?”

“Total of 750.00, tax included ma’am.”

“Donny, we coulda gone to Disneyland for that price,” she says to her husband and also me.

When they’ve finally paid and entered the park, I watch them walk towards the hot dog stand.

They’ll leave the park with their kids covered in puke.

You really shouldn’t eat before going bungee jumping.

The Beyond Earth theme park used to be super busy. When half the island dropped off into nothingness and it was built, we had reservations booked months in advance.

I guess bungee jumping off the side of the earth got old.

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I've never done it myself, afraid of heights. People come back hysterical; they're crying, snot fogs up the glass inside of the spacesuit as they're reeled back in from zero gravity. They say they've seen God or Death.

I have to help sanitize the suits every night with this spray that smells like rotten lemons.

I can't imagine breathing that in for 45 minutes straight.

I lift my arms, checking my armpits. The heat's soaked through my atrocious orange polo work shirt to form salt rings.

I pick at my face, a bad habit of mine, trying to scratch it open and scoop out all the oil glands that turn my face to zitty perfection.

This is what I do every day of the summer. For 10 dollars an hour. That's how much my summer is worth to my parents.

It's not like there's much to do on the island anyways. There's Delgado's *Mangue et Bière* where they serve cold beer in shucked out ripe mangoes but it closes by three. There's a dilapidated movie drive-in where they screen French films over the weekend but I don't have a car. If I were ever invited to Bijou's beach parties I wouldn't have anything to wear.

Coquillage et crustacées do not make for a practical bikini.

I wouldn't wear a bikini anyways.

I check the time on my phone. 19:00 heure. Time to go clean the suits.

I lock up the entrance booth and squish through the spinning gates. The theme park owner built a huge wall around the falls that can be seen from everywhere on the

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island. There was protest initially but after the islanders started to see how many tourists it attracted they didn't care so much.

The park's pretty lame. They built the walls around a river that runs throughout it, ending in the falls. They've built some minor waterpark features themed with little green aliens blasting water at the kids. Spaceship rowboats float along in the saltwater.

I walk into the only building in the park, where the locker rooms and changing areas are for the spacesuits. Odane's already spraying the insides down.

"Odane, I'm just gonna grab an extra bottle," I say and he waves. He's into his late 20s, pudgy, forced into a too tight orange polo that rolls of fat escape from.

I enter the maintenance closet and glance behind me. Odane is busy scrubbing away at some residual masticated hot dog chunks.

There are three keys set on hooks within the closet. I swipe the spare gate key and quickly tuck it between my breasts, the metal cold against my tan skin.

"Can you grab me another garbage bag? This one's full." His high-pitched voice carries into the maintenance closet.

"Got it," I say and return to aid him in the clean-up.

Five full garbage bags later we're finished work and we part ways outside of the gates as the sun lowers itself to the ground.

I lean down, like I'm about to tie my shoelaces.

Odane has already started up the cobblestone street so I quickly duck into the bushes and wait. I settle on the ground. My hands work their way up to my face and I start to dig at my skin, peeling dry pieces off of my nose and flicking them into the dirt.

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I can feel the pimples blistering my jawline, my face. I know they're made up of me but they feel like tiny alien spaceships that have drilled into my skin and nested.

And everyone can see them.

The alien. That I'm inhuman.

Wind whistles through the thick foliage of the jungle, caressing my skin. Even as the sun sets, the air drips with warmth. The drops settle on the bell shaped mauve jacaranda that spill from the heavens throughout the island. The jungle exists in swaths of emerald, fuchsia bursts and tropical blue peeking through ever so often from the ocean.

It isn't long before I hear the bumping base of Emilio's truck. He's one of the only kids on the island that has a car. The roads here are a wreck of stone, built by the French forces when they colonized the island, and they haven't been repaired since. It's quicker to walk anyways.

The truck does a screeching circle, kicking up dust before settling its headlights on my spot in the bushes.

"Tu fais quoi là? In the bushes?" Bijou sneers as she exits the car. Even in the harsh amber of the headlights her skin glows with perfection.

"I was waiting for you. I thought the bushes would be a good idea," I say.

"Like anyone cares, Chicken Scratch," Emilio scoffs. That's what everyone calls me at school. Because of my face.

He hops out from the driver's side and slides across the hood of his car, catching Atabei around the waist as she disembarks. He twirls her in his arms before setting her down beside him.

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Bijou watches it all, eyes burning. Atabei and she make eye contact and she slowly slides out of Emilio's arms to rest on the warm metal of his car.

Bijou smiles, but only from the corner of her lips. She walks to me, swaying her hips back and forth.

Emilio watches with hunger.

Bijou extends a hand and I think for a second she means to help me out of the foliage.

"The key?" she asks.

I shake my head and get up, pushing my way out of the bushes, leaves scrape against my dry hairy legs.

"Oh, come on. *Tu ne me fait pas confiance?*" she asks. I can tell she's freshly applied pink lip-gloss. Probably after snogging Emilio behind the school.

"I told you. It's my job. My key." No way am I giving it to her. It's the only thing that keeps me close to them.

Bijou rolls her eyes. I head toward the theme park's gated doors, unlocking and then sliding up the metal gates. They follow me inside and I make sure to close, but not lock, the door behind me. There's no security or cops around but I don't want us to get busted.

They head towards the falls, giggling and laughing in the moonlight.

Atabei's short dress lingers along her thick brown thighs as she holds hands with Bijou.

I can't help but take a moment to stare. It's so easy for them. Why can't it be easy for me?

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It'll be soon.

A glint of white catches my eyes and I notice the aliens on the waterpark. The paint's chipping away on their eyes but they still glow in the dark.

It gives me the creeps. The way they stare, like they're waiting for me to turn around so they can shoot me in the back with their laser blasters.

I run to catch up with the others. They haven't even noticed my absence.

"*Imbécile!*" Bijou shouts, "How am I supposed to get drunk?" She brandishes a backpack full of Kalik beer at Emilio.

"Calm down, everything's fine," Emilio places a hand on Bijou's shoulder and her eyes soften with his touch. He turns to me, "Let's get this going already. Chicken Scratch?"

"Uh, yeah, of course. I'll need some help though. To move the suits?" I look to each of them. Bijou and Emilio are too busy making moony faces at one another—

"I'll help," Atabei pipes.

"Really?" Bijou asks in surprise. Atabei blushes. "Have fun then". Bijou starts to shimmy out of her clothing and Emilio follows suit.

"Just be careful not to get close to the," *Splash!* Emilio and Bijou jump into the river laughing, "Falls," I finish.

"Where to?" Atabei asks, chewing on her lower lip.

She's beautiful just like Bijou but even more so with her warmth. She's kind, unlike her. I've seen Atabei help the younger kids rip holes in the plastic bags to suck out the frozen guava at lunch. She sings lilting verses of songs while she does homework,

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while Bijou applies lip-gloss, while Emilio throws paper balls at the back of the teacher's head, and while I watch all of them.

She's never called me Chicken Scratch.

"This way," I say and point at the building behind us.

As we walk, her box braids swing back and forth. She's fastened little gold beads into her braid. I wonder if her mom did that for her? My mom doesn't have time to do that with the bakery. She doesn't really have time to check where I am either.

I could be at work for all she knows. I am at work, technically.

We reach the building and I quickly punch in the passcode to enter. We go in. It's hard to see anything without the lights on.

"Oh!" Atabei cries as she stumbles and her warm body flails into mine. I catch her around the waist and her hand.

The lights come on with motion detection. Her hand stays within mine for a second more and she pulls away.

She's embarrassed of touching me. She must be.

We make it down the hall and I open the door to the spacesuits. They're all bright orange with the little Space Aardvark saluting us on the side of the arm.

Atabei runs her fingers over the thick material of the suits and begins to laugh.

"What is it?" I ask.

"An aardvark?" she giggles.

I let out a giggle too, "It's a Space Aardvark actually".

She bursts into laughter at that, and I feel like maybe there's a chance I could be her friend as I chuckle along with her.

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I check that the spacesuits oxygen tanks are properly hooked onto the back of the suits and full. We grab three of the spacesuits and walk back giggling, casting glances every so often at the aardvark and then laughing some more.

As we get closer to the others and the falls, we hear shouting.

“You went down on her in the—Oh, don’t you fucking walk away from me, *espèce de salaud! Tu crois que j’suis une idiote?*”

“We weren’t exclusive Bijou. It was just one time—”

“At my beach house? In my parent’s room?”

“Look, I came onto her. It was my fault,” Emilio says.

They’re out of the river, water dripping off of them in the heat of the argument.

Bijou is pushing Emilio around, swatting at his face with firm palms.

A few bottles of Kalik are strewn over the thick green grass.

“We weren’t *not* together,” Bijou cries.

She advances on him, pushing him towards the falls.

“I thought we were going to get off this island together. I thought we had plans.”

Atabei drops the spacesuits and runs towards them. I can’t help but watch.

“You were my first. I thought that meant something to you? I thought that I...I...”

she searches for her words. Bijou winds her fist up just as they reach the ledge of the falls.

“Stop! Stop it!” sweet Atabei screams.

But Bijou goes for the swing.

Emilio ducks.

Bijou loses her balance, stumbles forward and falls off the face of the earth.

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“No. No. No!” Atabei screams. Emilio falls to his knees.

Bijou is screaming. It keeps going. She hasn’t hit the atmosphere where the air becomes too thin to breathe.

“What do we do? What do we do?” Emilio repeats over and over.

All of this was my idea. I wanted them to need something from me. Something that would force them to spend time with me, and then one day I wouldn’t have to force them. I’d just be one of them.

And then it hits me.

I can save Bijou. I, *alone*, can do this.

I run as fast as I can to the falls. Beside Emilio is a large hook with a long rope attached to it. I’ve seen Odane do it a thousand times. I know I can save her.

I connect the spacesuit to the long rope of industrial strength cord and start to put on the spacesuit.

“What are you doing?” Atabei asks as she watches my movements in wonder.

“I can save her,” I say, “She’ll have a few minutes left before she can’t breathe anymore. If I get to her fast enough I can bring her back.”

“What do you need us to do?” Emilio asks. Emilio who would steal my homework to copy from. Emilio who sent his buddy to ask me out on a date as a joke. Emilio who pointed at my flat chest in a bikini and laughed.

“You’ll have to pull me back in. The rope will go slack in zero gravity. When I tug on it, pull me up,” I say with newfound confidence.

Everyone is listening to me. To *me*.

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I finish putting the spacesuit on and attach the helmet, turning it into place and then I approach the falls.

I've never gotten this close. The river flows into the waterfall that drops off the island's edge into nothingness, spilling its water endlessly into space.

My heart vibrates just looking at the drop into nothing and my breath starts to fog up the inside of the glass.

Remember why you're doing this.

"You ready?" Emilio asks.

I nod and take a deep breath. Here goes nothing.

I step off and plummet through the sky.

Down, down, down. My breath compresses inside of me, bursting to escape up, back to solid ground.

My limbs flail in the air. I'm shaking too hard to control anything.

But then I start to slow down. I can feel my descent physically slowing and I realize that gravity is starting to lose its effect. That I'm moving into zero gravity gradually.

I regain control of my limbs and I finally look around.

I'm floating in space. Along with a galaxy of water droplets. The waterfall has exploded into millions of reflective tears in zero gravity. They harness the light of far reaching stars, imbued with lavender and ambers of planets and suns I will never touch.

And there she is. Bijou floats just beneath me. Tendrils of curled dark hair spiral away from her. She is angelic.

I slowly descend, floating with the natural pull of my previous descent.

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I'm by her side and I turn her towards me.

Her face is mutilated with frost lines. They scorch through her full lips that still gasp for air, they lash her dark cheeks and thin jawline, they pockmark her skin like chicken scratches. She is inhuman.

She opens her eyes at my touch. Green with terror.

"Please," she gasps puffing out a cloud of air she so desperately needs.

I can see bits of my skin reflected in the glass of the helmet. The pimples that cover my face in burning humiliation. My own chicken scratches.

She's struggling. She's taking in short gasping breaths. Her eyes widen, begging me. Begging me for her life.

"Do you need me?" I ask.

"Yes—" she half makes out and begins to choke.

I consider it. Do I save her?

"I don't need you anymore," I say.

I watch as she chokes to death, her eyes roll back into her head and her body goes limp.

I tug on the rope.

I know what to do.

They pull me up and I get to see Bijou disappear in a cloud of rain. It's beautiful really.

When they finally pull me up, I pull all the stunts. I start to cry and blubber. Just like all those idiots who've come back from the Ultra Space Bungee. The one's that say they've stared Death in the face.

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But I have.

They both break down crying, and Atabei reaches for my hand and holds it this time.

When the two of them have collected themselves somewhat, I have them drag the other spacesuits back. I leave the gate key and my spacesuit on the ground near the falls.

They'll rule it a suicide.

We're altogether now. They think I'm a hero.

Obviously, Bijou isn't here. But she was always so mean to me. She deserved it.

Sweet Atabei will become my best friend and only love, we'll do everything together. Maybe someday I'll tell her what I did for us.

Sometimes we'll hang out with Emilio, it's mostly just so he can drive us to beach parties.

No one will ever call me Chicken Scratch again.